

In case you missed it

A round up of news of particular interest to women

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Fund touts health care plan benefits

WASHINGTON -- The law Congress adopted last spring to reshape the nation's health care system will benefit women especially because they traditionally have relied on health care more than men, faced more insurance problems and had greater difficulty paying medical bills, according to a new analysis.

The Commonwealth Fund found that women will be helped in particular by central aspects of the legislation designed to improve and expand access to insurance. Commonwealth was a major supporter of the legislation. The study on women is part of a series of reports the foundation is planning to demonstrate the law's relevance to different groups of people.

Once the insurance expansion occurs, starting in 2014, about 15 million of the nearly 17 million U.S. women who are uninsured will be eligible for coverage with federal financial help, the report predicts. Slightly more than half of them will qualify to join Medicaid, and the rest will qualify for government subsidies to buy private coverage through new insurance "exchanges" run by states.

In addition, the report says, women will be helped by the fact that insurance policies available through the exchanges will be required to cover a standard set of health benefits to be defined by federal officials. As a result, such insurance will cover care for women who are pregnant, coverage absent today from nearly 9 out of 10 health plans sold to people who buy policies on their own rather than getting it through a job.

The Commonwealth report does not focus on provisions in the law that apply only to women. Instead, it examines ways that women will be affected by significant aspects of the law that will apply to everyone. It notes that recent surveys have shown women are prone to difficulty finding and affording coverage.

VA to step up women's services

WASHINGTON -- About 1.8 million women have served in the U.S. military, and with 245,000 female soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, it's estimated that within a decade, women will make up 16 percent of all veterans.

Yet until recently, some health clinics for veterans did not have separate bathrooms for women. Some doctors who treat returning service members haven't kept up with medical advances on issues from sexual trauma to prosthetics and menopause. Some Veterans Affairs computers still spit out data mistaking female veterans for wives of men who fought.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is turning its resources to women as the government braces for an increasing demand for services from female veterans.

Last week, clinicians, benefits experts, VA leaders and veterans from across the country discussed the department's stepped-up efforts and the need to do more for women. "We are late, and the surge in women veterans has begun and will continue," VA Secretary Eric Shinseki told the crowd of 175 gathered at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery. "Time is not on our side."

The retired four-star general and former Army chief of staff has made increasing services for women a top priority, securing \$217 million in gender-specific programs for the next fiscal year, a 21 percent increase from 2009. The increased investment is aimed at providing better care and more privacy and security for female patients.

Each of the 144 veterans health care systems in the country now has a full-time care manager for women. Primary care is being redesigned so a single physician addresses preventive care, routine gynecological care and other medical issues for women. Health care providers now can enroll in refresher courses on women's health needs, and more training is scheduled.

Study on babies of working moms

A new study finds that babies raised by working mothers don't necessarily suffer cognitive setbacks, an encouraging finding that follows a raft of previous reports suggesting that women with infants were wiser to stay home.

Researchers at Columbia University say they are among the first to measure the full effect of maternal employment on child development, not just the potential harm caused by a mother's absence from the home, but the prospective benefits that come with her job, including higher family income and better child care.

In a 113-page report released last week, the authors conclude "that the overall effect of 1st-year maternal employment on child development is neutral."

The report is based on data from the most comprehensive child-care study to date, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care. It followed more than 1,000 children from 10 geographic areas through first grade, tracking their development and family characteristics.

Infants raised by mothers with full-time jobs scored somewhat lower on cognitive tests, deficits that persisted into first grade. But that negative effect was offset by several positives. Working mothers had higher income, they were more likely to seek high-quality child care, and they displayed greater "maternal sensitivity," or responsiveness toward their children, than did stay-at-home mothers. Those positives canceled out the negatives.

Project recruiting women candidates

WASHINGTON -- Despite a number of high-profile female candidates this year, women have yet to break through in politics the way they have in the rest of the work force. Only 17 percent of members of Congress are women, and women make up just 24 percent of state lawmakers.

Now, a group of activists and academics hopes to train a new generation of female candidates in time for the 2012 elections.

The 2012 Project aims to take advantage of next year's redrawing of state and congressional districts.

Reapportionment, which occurs after the census, typically creates new and open seats to account for population shifts. They are easier for political newcomers to win than those held by incumbents. Over

the next two years, participants in the project will recruit women of diverse political views to run for office. They will place a particular emphasis on encouraging "Third Act" women -- baby boomers who might be looking for a new challenge after family and careers.

"Our hope is to get women who have made it in their fields, who have broken their own glass ceilings, who are at a point where they're asking, 'What's next for me?' " said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, which is leading the project. "We want to say, 'Why not think about politics and public service?' "

Compiled by Jessica Runnels Rourk from wire reports

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